



BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TALK ON KEY FOSTER CARE ISSUES

Two peasants by a riverbank see a small bundled baby floating in a wicker basket down the river. One of the peasants quickly rushes forward to scoop up the child and bring it to safety. A few minutes later, they are startled to see yet another child and once again work quickly to ensure its safety. After a passage of time, a third child is seen approaching them in a basket floating down the stream. This time, however, one of the peasants jumps up and begins to run away from the shore. His friend, horrified, rushes after him shouting, "Where are you going? Aren't you interested in saving this child?" The departing peasant looks back and replies as he rushes away. "I can't sit idly by and watch the destruction of one child at a time. I am going upstream to find the root cause, what's at the heart of this unfortunate situation."

It has been said, "***The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children.***" Our efforts to do the best for our children must be devoted, not simply to our own families or even to helping one child at a time, but must also take into account the reforms upstream in how we, as a community, "parent" our neediest children.

In particular, for the over *half a million* children nationwide who "grow up" in foster care, we struggle mightily to satisfy our obligation to parent these children responsibly and compassionately.

I. HOW BIG IS THE PROBLEM

National Figures reflect:

- A child in the US is reported abused or neglected every *11 seconds*
- The number of youth in our nation's foster care system in 2000 was twice as many as in the late 80s

In **California**, figures are even more disturbing:

- A child is abused or neglected every 4 minutes
- Nearly 100 times a day a child in California will be removed from his or her home and placed in foster care
- The total number of foster youth in our state is greater than the total enrollment of our three largest universities and has *tripled* over the last 20 years

Here in **Los Angeles**:

- Los Angeles County has more children in out of home care than in any other county, accounting for astounding **one in ten** foster youth in the United States
- We parent as a community almost 30,000 foster youth and spend over **\$4.5 billion** per year to help children and families in need

II. THE SAD REALITY IS THAT MORE IS DONE TO *TRAUMATIZE* THAN TO *HEAL* THESE YOUTH WE REMOVE FROM THEIR FAMILIES.

- Half of our youth in foster care have not received appropriate mental health services; 25% don't receive timely medical care
- Almost one third of children in foster homes are living below the poverty level
- More than half are separated from siblings -- often the only anchor they have

We lag far behind the national standard in *reunifying foster youth* with their parents and have been all too willing to “raise” children in the foster care system, where they live **life in motion** -- moving from placement to placement, school to school, and often group home to psychiatric institution

- 43% of foster children in California are moved 3 or more times, more than one in 10 are moved 5 times or more, and youth attend on average 9 schools during time in foster care;
- The median length of stay in Los Angeles in what is intended to be a transitory system is 2 *years*
- Los Angeles moves youth on average 3-4 times during "life" in foster care

Even **safety** is a challenge

- Once removed, children in LA are twice as likely to be abused by their foster parents
- Tragically, nearly 100 foster youth in Los Angeles died in the past two years, many at the hands of the very people our system hired and entrusted to protect them

It is not surprising with these figures that today's troubled youth are becoming tomorrow's **troubled adults**. Of the thousands of youth a year who “age out” of the foster care system at about age 18:

- Nearly 40% will not have graduated high school
- Nearly 1/3 will become homeless in their first year after leaving the system

- Unemployment rates are estimated at 50%; 40% are on public assistance shortly after emancipation
- Most depressingly, nearly one in five will end up incarcerated within their first two years following emancipation

In short, this is simply no way to "support" our community's troubled families and no way to collectively "parent" our community's troubled youth. This is anything but an acceptable societal, human, and financial toll.

It is hoped these figures have served not to depress, but to motivate all of us to strive to do better

III. WHAT WE CAN DO TO IMPROVE THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

Get Engaged as a Community and take direct action to support foster youth, with whatever time you are able to spend.

- *Adopt a Child* and provide a permanent, loving home to a foster child. You do not have to be wealthy or married. Financial and medical assistance is available.
- *Be a Foster Parent.* Give foster kids a warm and safe home environment. Training and assistance are available.
- *Be a CASA.* Visit regularly with an assigned foster child and represent the best interests of the child both inside and outside the courtroom.
- *Become a Mentor.* Help youth who are about to turn 18 and face life on their own for the first time.
- *Be a Donor.* Donate your time to help children learn to read or give the personal items that so many of these children lack.
- *Hire and Train Foster Youth.* By investing in hiring young people from the foster-care system and helping to train them for successful careers, employers provide these youth with a critical start toward a lifetime of self-sufficiency.
- *Celebrate a Foster Child's Birthday.* Something as small as a gift certificate can make a foster child feel that they were not overlooked on a birthday or holiday.

Support Critical Areas of System Reform

1. Work together to Lift the Federal Funding "Straitjacket" and reform the "Front Door" of the Foster Care System

- No one disputes the fact that we take too many youth into care, remove too many from the home. Yet, Title IVE – largest source of federal foster care money – is tied to removal from the home and length of time in care.
- All too often, caution rather than wisdom has become the guidepost. This results in particularly harsh consequences for children and families living in poverty.

Doesn't allow for *up front* support of children and families; efforts to keep families intact, whenever possible.

Results in a low rate of reunification of families once the children enter foster care

- As a result, too much money is spent *reactively*, after a child has been abused, and not nearly enough is available *strategically to prevent* abuse from occurring in the first place.

Our State should:

- Support the pending federal Title IV-E waiver request that will allow for flexibility in determining how to best support children and families within existing family structures
- Realize that successful implementation will require an initial *investment* and should not be presumed -- as Gov. budget seems to -- that will see immediate cost savings; this cost neutral investment will be well worth the long-term savings both in dollars and in the lives of at risk children.

2. Attend to Educational Needs of Foster Youth

Few aspects of parenting more basic or critical than arming children with basic skills need for stable adult life – tending to their education

Children in foster care have consistently poor academic outcomes, increasing the odds that they will experience poverty as adults.

- * Thirty percent function below grade level,
- * Over 35% are in special education,
- * Half have been held back at least one grade level,

- * Only 54% - compared to 84% of nonfoster youth – complete high school, and as few as 15% enroll in college.

State action is critical to close the education achievement gap. We need to:

- * Enhance *accountability, communication and coordination* among all parts of the system -- child welfare, schools, courts -- that too often don't talk to each other
- * Ensure implementation of *new laws* (AB 490), to ensure school stability for foster youth, and to close the educational achievement gap.
- * Address concerns stemming from large numbers of foster children attend *nonpublic schools* that often provide substandard attention to children with the highest academic needs.

Until the State holds these schools accountable for the quality of education offered, we will continue to throw good money after bad – millions of dollars at a time.

3. Address Mental Health Needs of Foster Youth

Experts estimate that *30 to 85 percent* of youngsters in out-of-home care suffer significant emotional disturbances and report that adolescents living with foster parents or in group homes have a *four times higher* rate of serious psychiatric disorders than youth living with their own families.

- * Too often, mental health needs of foster children are overlooked until they exhibit harmful behavior.
- * Too willing to medicate rather than address needs of these youth

Must craft new approaches to address:

- * The lack of coordination between the child welfare, mental health and school systems; fragmented provision of services.
- * Failure to properly assess youth; no one provider is given the clear responsibility of monitoring the mental health needs of these children, and when mental health services are finally made available, they are often either inadequate or too late to be of significant benefit to the child.

The resulting cost to the State in both resources and human lives will continue to escalate until *all* agencies develop meaningful ways to work together to address the mental health needs of these children.

4. Support Permanence for Youth in Foster Care

- * Children who emancipate from foster care without a reliable long-term plan and without the support of a committed and caring adult are at high risk of experiencing poverty and homelessness.
- * We need to do more to provide *permanence* for foster youth, whether that means identifying and supporting appropriate relative placements, facilitating adoptions, or simply implementing the mandate in AB 408 (Steinberg) that foster youth who emancipate from care be connected to one adult who has played a part in that youth's life.

5. The Needs of Crossover Youth

- * California's statutory framework results in a complete severance of dependency jurisdiction when the youth crosses over into delinquency -- an approach at odds with nearly every other state in the country.
- * As a result: many former foster children remain under the jurisdiction of the Delinquency Court longer than necessary based on concerns that the termination of probation jurisdiction will leave the child without adequate care, housing, and supervision; "raised" by probation acting as child welfare surrogate.
- * Need to reform our approach and enable systems to work together to address needs of this pop.

6. Don't overlook need for Adequate Support of the Dependency Court System

- * Qualified hearing officers and competent counsel are essential to our dependency system. Judicial retention and recruitment should be a top priority.
- * Don't arm courts with adequate tools to manage their dependency calendars and track status of cases that move through the system.
- * Effective *advocacy* is also critical for the system to function and the needs of children to be addressed. Cost saving measures which result in unfairly compensated counsel and excessive caseloads result in decreased efficiency, poor quality representation, high turnover, and increased expense over time.

CONCLUSION

There are many ways to get involved in helping foster youth, ranging from making a lifetime commitment to an individual child, to providing gift certificates so that birthdays

and holidays are not overlooked, to supporting public measures to reform the foster care system.

One philosopher aptly described children as the “*living message we send to a time we will not see.*” For our country’s over 30,000 foster youth, the message that is penned is all too often one of despair, neglect, and abuse. **We can, and must, do better to change that future.**